Not What I Expected

Celebration of the Resurrection – John 20:1-18

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*I have seen the Lord! John 20:18*

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My husband, Bob, and I went hiking with some friends in the Blue Ridge several years ago. You might know the spot. If you have driven along the Parkway and stopped at Doughton Park, where there was a little lodge and an overlook. Down in the holler, way down, you can see an old abandoned log cabin, called the Caudill Cabin – spelled just like our former church ember, Dave Caudill. Well, that is where we hiked.

We hiked and hiked. Hours and hours, down the mountain, along a narrow, rocky path, crisscrossing a bubbling creek about a thousand times, running low on trail mix and water, we finally made it to the Caudill Cabin. When we stepped inside, there was a visitor’s log, for people to make note of their presence. You can imagine there were not many entries in the log. But someone who came before us had written, “Less than I expected! Not what I expected!”

Not what I expected. We wondered, what were you expecting, way down here? Starbucks? Were you hoping to order a Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese when you got to the bottom of this long and winding cove?

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Expectations can trip us up. Nobody was expecting what we are going through today. Nobody was expecting to watch an Easter service alone on a laptop. Nobody was expecting to cancel the children’s Easter party. No one was expecting to be prevented from picking up a grandchild to hug or embracing a neighbor or holding the hand of an elderly friend. No one was expecting family dinners to be canceled, or birthday celebrations to be postponed.

Nobody was expecting jobs to be lost, investments to wither, schools to shut down, or churches to go virtual. Nobody was expecting a virus to show up and take away lives, thousands and thousands of lives, all over the world.

Yes, some people saw signs. Scientists and doctors gave warnings. But did anyone expect our lives to be turned upside down?

Here we are. Here we are alone with our laptops, without our families, without the touch of a friend. This may be the most significant Easter you will ever spend.

Now we know the surprise of the unexpected.

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Imagine it as it was then. All the grief of Jesus’ suffering bore down on the disciples. Beneath the cross of Jesus they stood, everything gone. Everything they were living for. What happened to all those healings and miracles? What was the purpose of those beautiful stories and the teachings about purity and peace and justice? How about those marvelous meals, the wine and the perfume, and the bringing together of all kinds of people, tax-collectors and sinners, soldiers and leaders, men and women, old and young?

What about the compassion for the woman who would be stoned or the embrace of the little children who ran to him? Not what I expected, they must have thought.

Little did they know that while they mourned and pined, Jesus went to hell and back. He did so, because when he left this earth and breathed his last, there would be no one without the promise of redemption. Even his brother who betrayed him. Judas, when he heard that Jesus had been condemned, repented and tried to return the thirty pieces of silver that was his betrayal payment. In agony, then, he hanged himself. Just as he did in his earthly walk, even after his death, Jesus went to the lowliest of the low, not to condemn but to restore. He enters the depths of death and separation to bring new life.

He is still going to hell and back, and he brings us with him. Any place that seems devoid of God’s presence, he is taking us there to fill that emptiness with love. Any person who is losing heart, he is calling you toward, to speak a word of hope. Any time someone feels abandoned, he is there with an anguished cry, “My God, my God” and wants us to be there too to wipe the tears away. For he does not remain there in the place of desertion and agony. He moves from the cross to the resurrection.

Not what I expected.

We expect Easter celebrations to include egg hunts and new dresses, singing and brass, and packed, packed churches. But maybe, maybe this year, we will not let all those fun and positive expectations obscure us from the real Good News.

The tomb was empty. The stone was rolled away. Earth could not contain him and death would not define him. He loved us to death, and he brings us to life

Mary didn’t expect to see Jesus, so she thought he was a gardener. Until he called her name. In your season of discontent, let him call your name. Whatever you are going through right now, let him come. You need not be socially distant from his risen spirit. He will come to you in a way that you don’t expect. But he will come in a way that matters. He comes with the promise of restoration.

Not what I expected. But what did you expect? Really? Who could have imagined, that God so loved the world, that God came. God came so we may know that agony and anguish are overcome. Friday is gone, and Sunday is here. Good is stronger than evil. Grace is stronger than sin. Love is stronger than hatred. Life is stronger than death.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!